

# *Field Report*

## **Snake River Birds of Prey National Conservation Area**

### ■ 1.0 Summary



The Snake River Birds of Prey National Conservation Area (NCA) was established by Congress in 1993 to recognize and perpetuate the area's wildlife values. The Snake River Birds of Prey NCA, the only NCA in Idaho, is managed by the Department of Interior's BLM.

The NCA encompasses 485,000 acres of public land along approximately 80 miles of the Snake River in southwestern Idaho. The river lies within a deep canyon that is surrounded by a vast plateau. Cliffs towering up to 700 feet above the river provide countless ledges, cracks, and crevices for nesting birds of prey, also known as raptors.

The combination of ideal nesting habitat in the Snake River Canyon and extraordinarily productive prey habitat on the adjacent plateau make this a place like no other for birds of prey. The area is actually a giant, natural raptor nursery. Fifteen species nest here each spring. Nine other raptor species use the area during part of their annual migration.

Proposed Alternative Transportation Systems (ATS) concepts to be further investigated include:

- Promoting a program of improved signage along access routes to and from the facility and signing along routes inside the boundaries.
- Survey the desirability of providing a bicycle trail connection from Kuna (approximately seven miles to the north). The desire to provide a trail system from Kuna was discussed, however, the relatively low use, lack of facilities and dispersed destinations within the site do not initially support the desire to enhance trails to/from the NCA.
- Continue the process of consolidating braided trails between similar origins and destinations.
- Provide funding for enhanced pull-outs along Swan Falls Road.

Based on the limited number of visitors and relatively dispersed nature of destinations within the NCA, transit is not considered to be a feasible alternative.

## ■ 2.0 Background Information

### 2.1 Location

The Snake River Birds of Prey NCA is located in southwestern Idaho, approximately 35 miles south of Boise. The NCA encompasses 482,640 acres of BLM administered public land along an 80-mile stretch of the Snake River. The general location is shown in Figure 1.

### 2.2 Administration and Classification

The Snake River Birds of Prey NCA is managed by the Department of Interior's BLM. The Wilderness Coordinator for the NCA is Frank Jenks.

### 2.3 Physical Description

The Snake River Birds of Prey NCA is an arid plain cut through on the western edge of the NCA by the high cliff walls of the Snake River. The plains area contains a high rodent population, which is an ideal food source for the raptors. The high cliffs of the Snake River provide a nesting area for the raptors. In addition, the thermals rising from the Snake river Canyon provide loft for the raptors to rise above the plains with little effort for hunting purposes. The layout of the NCA is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 1. Location Map

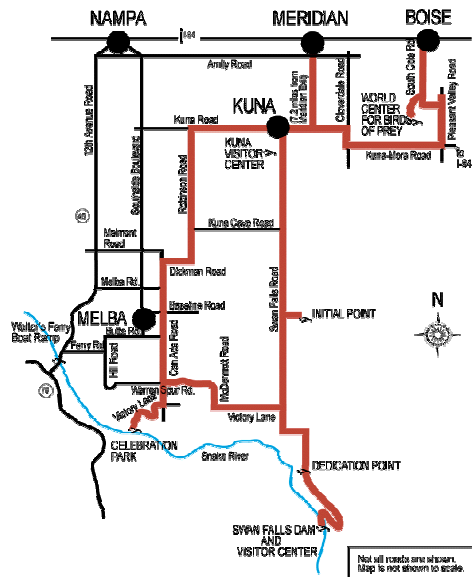
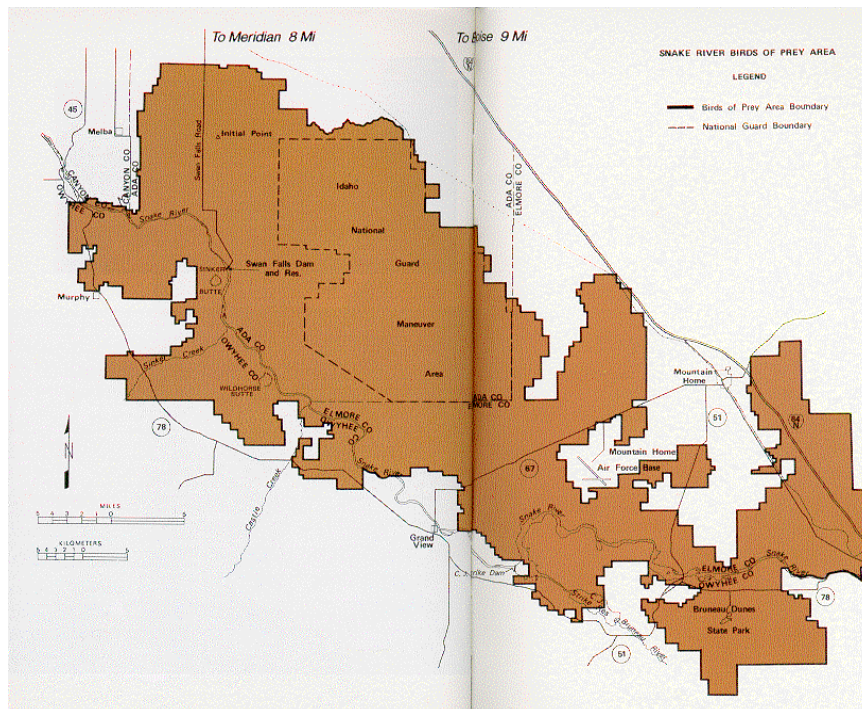


Figure 2. NCA Site Layout



Interspersed around and within the NCA are irrigated farms fields and limited level of housing. Approximately 120,000 acres on the east side of the NCA is used by the Idaho National Guard (ING) for tank maneuvers and training. The Snake River also has an historic hydroelectric dam at Swan Falls.

The NCA is especially important for prairie falcons. About 200 pairs nest here, representing an important part of the species' known population. Nesting success for prairie falcons is closely linked to the abundance of Townsend's ground squirrels, while nesting success for other raptors, especially golden eagles, is tied to the population cycles of black-tailed jackrabbits. Other famous residents include:

Nesting Raptors	Migrating Raptors
Golden eagle	Bald eagle
Prairie falcon	Sharp-skinned hawk
Red-tailed hawk	Osprey
Ferruginous hawk	Cooper's hawk
Swainson's hawk	Peregrine falcon
Northern harrier	Rough-legged hawk
American kestrel	Merlin
Turkey vulture	Gyr Falcon
Barn owl	Northern goshawk
Great horned owl	
Western screech-owl	
Burrowing owl	
Long-eared owl	
Short-eared owl	
Northern saw-whet owl	

## 2.4 Mission and Goals of the Snake River Birds of Prey Conservation Area

BLM's mission in the NCA, and other sites, is to preserve this remarkable wildlife habitat while providing for other compatible uses of the land. The BLM's purpose is to manage the area so that birds of prey flourish, as they have for thousands of years, in order that future generations will be able to experience and enjoy this special place.

## 2.4 Visitation Levels and Visitor Profile

The Snake River Birds of Prey area has a variety of visitors. The users vary in concentration as the seasons change. Some uses of the Conservation Area are:

- **Bird Watching** – Because of its high concentration of raptors, bird watching is a popular activity. During the period from April through June, where there is peak raptor activity, there are high concentrations of birds watchers.
- **Recreational Shooting** – Recreational shooting is a popular pastime in the Conservation Area. For safety reasons, recreational shooting is restricted to certain zones.
- **Hiking** – There are interpretive trails within the Conservation Area. In addition, there is an old railroad bridge that has been converted to pedestrian use crossing the Snake River at Celebration Park. This provides access to pedestrians to the east side of the Snake River Canyon (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3. Railroad Bridge Retrofitted for Pedestrian Use Across the Snake River**



- Rafting.
- Jet boating.
- Fishing.
- **Sightseeing**– The Swan Falls dam is an historic site with an interpretive center and an interpretive center and a picnic area (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4. Swan Falls Historic Dam on the Snake River**



There were an estimated 230,000 visitors in the 1998 fiscal year at the Snake River Birds of Prey NCA. Visitation has not fluctuated significantly in the last few years.

## ■ 3.0 Existing Conditions, Issues and Concerns

The Birds of Prey NCA has recently changed from a open BLM area to a Restricted Land Management Area. This is to protect the range area of the raptors from visitor overuse. The raptor population is being threatened because of the degradation of their hunting habitat. Overuse by visitors and wildfires have changed the ecosystem that makes up the hunting grounds of the raptors. Non-native cheatgrass have invaded the plains and are competing with native vegetation. Without native vegetation habitat, the rodent populations are dwindling, which in turn adversely affects the raptor population.

In addition, the lands within the canyon are being overused. There is a network of non-defined trails and roadway systems that degrade the river valley.

### 3.1 Transportation Conditions, Issues and Concerns

Access to the NCA is provided through a network of rural paved and unpaved, two-lane roadways. Roadways providing internal circulation are also two-lane roadways. The primary destinations within the facility (Dedication Point, Swan Falls Dam, Celebration Park) can all be accessed via paved routes.

Parking within the NCA is generally not a great concern. During peak periods there are a limited number of times where demand will exceed the supply at Celebration Park and Dedication Point.

Trails within the facility are primarily unpaved. There are no significant plans for paving trails. A mainly volunteer effort is being planned for upgrading the 0.5-mile path from the Dedication Point parking area to the canyon overlook.

Park transportation issues/priorities identified by BLM would include:

- Upgrading selected corridors to paved surface (internal).
- Consolidation of access. When the facility was an open access area, travelers would trend to create new trails from an origin to a destination. Numerous paths/trails created an impact on the environment. Through consolidation, the impact to the environment could be reduced (even with a greater concentration of vehicles).
- Upgrading paths for both pedestrians and bicyclists.
- Improvements to the access signage. When additional “official” routes to/from the facility are created, improvements to the access signage will be required.

- Providing turnouts throughout the driving tour area.
- Provide a horse trail from south of Kuna to Celebration Park and from Swan Falls dam to the railroad.

### **3.2 Community Development Conditions, Issues and Concerns**

The town of Kuna, Idaho is perceived as the gateway community for the Snake River Birds of Prey NCA. The town provides the closest services for the NCA. Although Kuna is the closest town to the area, the town's economic development study does not recognize that the Conservation Area has an impact to the town.

Kuna is working on the High Desert Museum project and the National Cowboy Hall of Fame with the expectation that the facilities would bolster the tourism economy in the area. In addition, Kuna is turning into a bedroom community for the greater Boise Metropolitan area that lies to the north.

At one time, there were two to three operators providing tour bus service through the NCA. In addition, there were four to five river tour/floating operators. Today there is single operator consolidating both activities. Others simply could not economically provide services and failed.

### **3.3 Natural or Cultural Resource Conditions, Issues and Concerns**

Birds of Prey NCA was created to protect the natural resources in the area that affect the raptor population. There have been programs to re-seed disturbed areas or areas invaded by cheatgrass to try to establish native vegetation. In addition, the BLM is working to keep visitors on established roads and trails to keep the destruction of habitat at a minimum.

Cultural resources are a big part of the Conservation Area as well. Swan Falls Dam was built in 1901 and was the first major hydroelectric dam on the Snake River. The original dam and powerhouse are still intact and are now a museum for this historic site. In addition to the dam site, Celebration Park has unpaved trails to petroglyph sites in the area.

### **3.4 Recreation Conditions, Issues and Concerns**

The biggest recreation concern for the area is the balance between recreation users and the natural resources that are within the conservation area. With the numbers of motorized off-road vehicles, hikers, mountain bikers, and bird watchers, there is a concern for the potential for degradation of the natural environment. At this point, the BLM is working to channel recreational users to specific areas to minimize the spread of impacts; while at the same time, implementing an education program about ethical usage of the area.



Another problem for recreation users in the conservation area is lack of facilities. There is very little signage in the area and only primitive facilities, such as pit toilets and non-paved trails. There is only one campground in the conservation area.

## ■ 4.0 Planning and Coordination

### 4.1 BLM Plans

There are no current transportation plans for Birds of Prey NCA. The unit feels that at present, there are no needs for a transportation plan. In addition, there are no carrying capacity studies for the park.

### 4.2 Public and Agency Coordination

The BLM works with the ING in managing the 485,000 plus acres of the site. An EIS is currently underway through which the impact of the ING arterial range on the birds of prey is being addressed. In addition, staff from the BLM coordinate planning with the Idaho State Parks Department through the local trail planner.

## ■ 5.0 Assessment of Need and System Options

### 5.1 Magnitude of Need

Transportation needs associated with the Snake River Birds of Prey NCA would likely be quantified as low to moderate. Principally, the needs would range from upgrades to a number of access roads, to trail enhancements to signing to support consolidation of access routes. Proposed concepts to be further investigated include:

- Promoting a program of improved signage along access routes to and from the facility and signing along routes inside the boundaries.
- Survey the desirability of providing a bicycle trail connection from Kuna (approximately seven miles to the north). The desire to provide a trail system from Kuna was discussed, however, the relatively low use, lack of facilities and dispersed destinations within the site do not initially support the desire to enhance trails to/from the NCA.
- Continue the process of consolidating braided trails between similar origins and destinations.
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## **5.2 Range of Feasible Transit Alternatives**

Based on the limited number of visitors and relatively dispersed nature of destinations within the NCA, transit is not considered to be a feasible alternative.

## **5.3 General Transit System Considerations**

As previously stated, transit has not been considered as a transportation improvement to the NCA.

# ■ **6.0 Bibliography**

*Snake River Birds of Prey National Conservation Area Management Plan*, U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management, 1995.

# ■ **7.0 Persons Interviewed**

Frank Jenks, BLM

Leo Hennessey, Idaho State Parks Department

Steve Guinn, Kuna Futures Economic Development Committee